

POLICY BRIEF #4

Young people's mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic

MOTHERS' and
YOUNG PEOPLE'S
study

strong
and
well

Translating evidence from the Mothers' and Young People's Study to inform policy and practice

The Mothers' and Young People's Study

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to rapid and unprecedented changes to the lives of young people across the world.

In Australia, closure of non-essential services, stay at home orders, school closures, and other physical and social distancing measures created considerable challenges.

The implications of these challenges for young people's short and longer-term health and wellbeing are still unfolding.¹⁻³

This policy brief reports on the mental health of young people during Victoria's second lockdown. Lasting over 100 days, lockdown involved school closures, stay at home orders, restricted travel (5km), night curfew (8pm) and restriction of non-essential services.

We used data from the Mothers' and Young People's Study, designed to investigate the health and wellbeing of over 1500 first-time mothers and their children.

A sub-study was conducted to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people. A total of 267 young people (aged 14-17 years) completed online surveys between June and September 2020 during Victoria's second lockdown.

The online survey included a number of standardised measures asking about mental health and wellbeing. These included measures of depression (PHQ-A), anxiety (GAD-7), and thoughts of suicide.^{4,5}

How common were mental health difficulties?

Almost 2 out of every 5 young people in the study experienced mental health difficulties during the pandemic. The study showed that mental health difficulties were considerably more common during the pandemic than in the period prior to the pandemic.⁶

The study findings show that:



Around **2 in 5** young people (38%) were experiencing clinically significant **depressive symptoms**.



1 in 5 (20%) young people were experiencing clinically significant **anxiety symptoms**.



1 in 5 (21%) young people were experiencing thoughts of suicide most days or nearly every day.



Almost **half** (46%) of all young people experiencing depressive symptoms reported suicidal ideation.

What young people experiencing mental health difficulties had to say about the pandemic

I also had trouble feeling like anything was worth doing when I could just let the heavy feeling set in instead and lay in bed for hours instead of working.

I really hate the pandemic, I hated being alive during it and hated school when I usually love school. I really don't want to go into lockdown again because I fear it might kill me.

Why bother with repetitive useless schoolwork when everything is falling apart outside and there's nothing you can do but watch anyway? Why even bother?

Young people with mental health difficulties were more likely to say that they were experiencing:

- loneliness
- difficulties in their family relationships
- decreased quality in friendships
- worry about family members becoming infected with COVID-19.

I was really happy before because I have all these dreams and all these plans for my future, and now I get sad thinking about them. I am fighting with my family so much more but no one seems to want to talk about it.

What young people experiencing positive mental health had to say about the pandemic

Despite the upheaval and stress of the pandemic, many young people found ways to cope or even to thrive during the pandemic.

The following factors were associated with positive mental health outcomes for young people:

- Reporting more quality time with family and engaging in family activities
- Positive family relationships
- Staying connected to friends
- Spending time outdoors and engaging in exercise at least 3 times per week.



2 in 5

young people experienced mental health difficulties.

Seeking support

Less than half of young people experiencing mental health symptoms had accessed support for their mental health during the previous 3 months.



1 in 3 (34%) young people experiencing depressive and/or anxiety symptoms had seen a counsellor or psychologist in the previous 3 months

Just over 2 in 5 (44%) young people experiencing suicidal ideation had spoken to a counsellor or psychologist in the previous 3 months



Just over 1 in 10 (13%) young people experiencing suicidal ideation and **1 in 10 (10%)** experiencing depression or anxiety reported using a mental health telephone support line.



Very few young people experiencing mental health symptoms (**4%**) had spoken to a GP about their mental health in the previous 3 months.

What was getting in the way of accessing support?

Young people told us that the following things got in the way of getting support for their mental health:

- long wait times to see a psychologist or counsellor
- lack of a private space at home to talk to a psychologist or counsellor via telehealth
- fear and worries about the process of talking to a health professional about their mental health

Young people's voices:

I don't feel comfortable talking about my problems in my house, so I have stopped seeing my therapist

I wanted to see my school counsellor, but she was all booked out, so I have had to wait

I think it would have been better for my mental health to go talk to someone about those issues. I feel depressed and tired and anxious a lot of the time. But I didn't see someone because I wasn't motivated enough, scared to, etc.

Key challenges

Symptoms of depression and anxiety during the pandemic were common, and higher than pre-pandemic norms.⁶ Although the peak of the pandemic in Australia has passed, there are likely to be lasting impacts for young people and their families. Support to promote young people's wellbeing during the pandemic recovery period is essential to limit the extent of ongoing mental health difficulties faced by young people in the transition to adult life.

The Australian mental health service system was strained prior to the pandemic⁷ and this is likely to worsen with the subsequent rise in mental health issues. This study highlighted considerable challenges faced by young people seeking support for mental health difficulties. These included long wait times, substantial co-payment costs associated with private services, and fears and worries about the process.

Accessible mental health care for young people

- There is an urgent need for a range of flexible, accessible and affordable options for young people experiencing mental health difficulties to seek support.
- These options need to be emotionally and culturally safe for young people from diverse social and cultural backgrounds.
- Although mental health lines offer an important source of immediate 24 hour/7 days a week support, only a small proportion of young people experiencing clinically significant mental health difficulties choose to access them. Prior Australian research has noted that helplines are unable to provide continuity of care and address complex circumstances often co-occurring with mental health difficulties.⁴
- It is important that other options for providing immediate short-term and longer-term support to young people are a major focus of social investment in the post pandemic environment.

Prevention and early intervention

- While most mothers were aware of difficulties that young people were experiencing, some were not. Parents and other carers may benefit from information and support about mental health difficulties among young people and what they can do to help.
- There is also a need to raise awareness among young people and their parents/carers about when they should seek support from a mental health professional, how to go about doing it, and what to expect from this process.

- Schools and public health campaigns play a vital role in normalising help-seeking and reducing stigma associated with mental health difficulties.
- Poor mental health in young people can also be a response to family stress, financial hardship, parent mental health difficulties, parental conflict or family violence. It is critical that families and young people experiencing such difficulties are provided with options and resources appropriate to their individual and family circumstances.

Contact

**MOTHERS' and
YOUNG PEOPLE'S
study**

For further information about the Mothers' and Young People's Study see: strongerfutures.org.au/mothers-and-young-peoples-study or contact:

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References

Available on request.

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